

RHETORIC AND ETHICS IN SORDELLO'S  
*ENSENHAMEN D'ONOR*

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“A letter always arrives at its destination.”<sup>1</sup>

How to explain a figure like Sordello? For Dante, he was a figure of rectitude and loyalty to place as a marker of identity and integrity.<sup>2</sup> To the authors of the Occitan *razos*, he was a philanderer, a political opportunist, a man who seduced on demand for money and power yet claimed always to be the master of his fate and the servant of no one---other, perhaps, than pleasure.<sup>3</sup> Born in Goito, near Mantua, to impoverished nobility at

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits I* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> According to Dante in the *De vulgari eloquentia* (ed. S. Botterill [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], pp. 34-5), “Sordello of Mantua...this man of unusual eloquence abandoned the vernacular of his home town not only when writing poetry but on every other occasion” (“Sordellus de Mantua...qui, tantus eloquentie vir existens, non solum in poetando sed quomodocunque loquendo patrium vulgare deseruit”). In our first meeting with him in *Purgatorio* VI he embraces Virgil as a fellow Mantovan and the description of his spirit emphasizes his bearing: ‘O Lombard soul, how lofty and disdainful was your bearing, and the movement of your eyes how grave and slow! (“anima lombarda, / come ti stavi altera e disdegnosa / e nel mover de li occhi onesta e tarda!” Canto 5.61-63). *The Divine Comedy*, trans. C. Singleton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), pp. 58-59.

<sup>3</sup> The *vida* from manuscripts I and K reads: “Lo Sordels si fo de Sirier, de Mantoana, fills d’un paubre cavalier que avia nom ‘sier el Cort’. E delecta en cansos aprendre et en trobar, e briguet con los bons homes de cort, et apres tot so qu’el pot; e fez coblas e sirventes. E venc s’en a la cort del comte de San Bonifaci; e.l coms l’onret mot; e s’enamoret de la moiller del comte a forma de solatz, et ella de lui. Et avenc si que.l coms estet mal con los fraires d’ella, e si s’estranyet d’ella. E sier Icellis e sier Albrics, li fraire d’ella, si la feirent envolar al comte a sier Sordel; et s’en venc estar

the cusp of the thirteenth century, Sordello was on his own by late adolescence.<sup>4</sup> He seems to have made the rounds of the courts of Lombardy as a composer and singer of clever songs that eschewed any real attempt to convince of true love or sincerity, before landing in the Veneto as a court follower of the infamous Ezzelino da Romano.<sup>5</sup> He likely shared a taste for women and trickery with his patron, probably the most unsavory of the Northern lords and allies of Frederic II against the papacy.<sup>6</sup> That, at least, is the impression one would get from both *vidas*' accounts of his early years--the period before the bust-up. Ezzelino had apparently convinced Sordello to liberate his sister Cunizza from an unhappy marriage to Ricardo da Sanbonifaccio, which Sordello dutifully did; but if the pretext was love, and Dante seems to buy that story, the result was not so happily ever after. Having earned the enmity of the Sanbonifaccio clan, a major and powerful force in regional politics, he discarded Cunizza, perhaps through mutual consent, and ended up with another lady of his own choosing.<sup>7</sup> Having now alienated both the Sanbonifaccios and da Romanos, he stoically insisted on staying in the Veneto, even with a price on his head, and held out until 1229, when he was forced into exile. A first stop in Spain at the court of Alfonso IX and in Catalonia with Jaume I was followed by a circuit of Occitan centers, a virtual tour of the major courts of troubadour production in the previous century, and culminated in a long-term alliance with Raimon Berenger IV at Aix and an abiding friendship with the patron of his dreams,

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con lor, et estet longa sason on lor en gran benanansa. E pois s'anet en Proensa, on il receup grans honors de totz los bos homes, e del comte et de la comtessa, que li deron un bon castel e moillier gentil" in *Sordello, le poesie*, ed. and trans. Marco Boni (Bologna: Palmaverde, 1954), p. 276.

<sup>4</sup> For biographical information on the poet, see: Boni, *Sordello, le poesie* and the edition in English by James J. Wilhelm, *Sordello. The Poetry of...* (New York and London: Garland, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> See my *Love for Sale* (New York and London: Garland, 1997), pp. 87-94.

<sup>6</sup> On Frederic II see David Abulafia, *Frederick II: a Medieval Emperor* (London: Penguin, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> This information is provided by the second of the *vidas*, the longer one found in ms. A (Bibl. Vat. Lat. 5232), which claims that Sordello replaced Cunizza with another woman named Otha, who was part of the Strassi family from Treviso. Boni estimates that if this second affair took place at all it would probably have been in 1227, when Ezzelino had just left Verona to join his brother in Treviso. See *Biographies des troubadours*, eds. J. Boutière and A. Schutz (Paris: Nizet, 1973) pp. 562-68.

Blacatz of Aups. It was sometime during these travels and especially during his time in Aix and Aups that Sordello turned to writing *cansos* in a serious way, a dozen of which are extant among his more than forty known works. His last twenty-five years were spent at the mobile court of that ambiguous and ambitious master, the new imperial power of the thirteenth century and brother of Louis IX, the inscrutable Charles d'Anjou, Count of Provence and King of Sicily and Naples. It was during this final period of his life that Sordello in a sense "made it." He clearly became a trusted advisor of Charles, who brought him back to Naples as part of his retinue and left him in his will a castle and a substantial bit of property in the south. Sordello was still writing, traveling and working as an advisor well into his sixties and was by the end of his life a revered figure of poetic lore known for his political acumen.

While Dante would have known of him through his scandalous behavior in the Veneto forty years before his birth and his association with the powerful Charles, who soon became the de facto ruler of his native Florence as well, Sordello thereafter suffered the fate of many poets and advisors to the wealthy players of his age. For Robert Browning, who wrote about him a long and rather obscure poem, Sordello was a figure of frustration, caught in the labyrinthine morass of Northern Italian politics, more a projection of Browning's fears for his own fate, and that of his fellow poets, than a flesh and blood historical figure.

Most recently, Sordello has received new attention in the form of a rather dubious tribute from Roberto Bolaño in the novel/meditation *Nocturno de Chile*. Not a trapped man or a figure of rectitude and noble sentiment, as he was for Browning and Dante, Sordello appears in Bolaño as an elusive presence, always restive, never settling, capable of disruption--in sum, once again a figure of lost promise and disappointed ambition. In a long passage near the start of the novel, the young priest Sebastián Urrutia Lacroix, imbued with literary ambition and sick with hero worship, spends a night in the company of some of his esteemed elders, one of whom sees more of himself in Sordello's fate than he is willing to admit:

Then Farewell took two steps forward and his face appeared before me, the face of an ageing Greek God kept awake by the moon. I blushed intensely. Farewell's hand came to rest for a moment on my belt. He spoke to

me of night in the work of the Italian poets, night in Jacopo da Todi. Night in the work of the Penitents. Have you read them? I stammered. I said that at the seminary I had read a little of Giacomino da Vernona and Pietro da Bescapé. Bonvesin de la Riva as well. Then Farewell's hand squirmed like an earthworm cut in two by a mattock and detached itself from my belt, but the smile remained upon his face. What about Sordello? he said. Which Sordello? The troubadour, said Farewell, Sordel, also known as Sordello. No, I said. Look at the moon, said Farewell. I took a quick look at it. Not like that, said Farewell. Turn around and look properly. I turned around. I could hear Farewell murmuring behind me: Sordello, which Sordello? (and at this point Farewell's hand gripped my belt once again!), the one who rode with Raymond Berenger and Charles I of Anjou, Sordello, who was not afraid, who was not afraid, who was not afraid. And I remember thinking then that I was afraid, and yet I chose to go on looking at the moon. The cause of my trepidation was not Farewell's hand resting on my hip. It was not his hand, it was not the moonlit night or the moon, swifter than the wind sweeping down off the mountains, it was not the sound of the gramophone serving up one awful tango after another, it was not the voice of Neruda or his wife or his devoted disciple, but something else, so what in the name of Our Lady of Carmen was it, I asked myself as I stood there. Sordello, which Sordello? Repeated Farewell's voice sarcastically behind me, Dante's Sordello, Pound's Sordello, the Sordello of the *Ensenhamens d'onor*, the Sordello of the *planh* on the death of Blacatz, and then Farewell's hand moved down from my hip towards my buttocks and a flurry of Provençal rogues blustered on the terrace, making my black cassock flutter, and I thought: The second woe is past, and, behold, the third woe cometh quickly . . . <sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Nocturno de Chile*, translated as *By Night in Chile*, trans. C. Andrews (London: Vintage, 2009), pp. 14-15.

This glorious and witty scene of literary and sexual seduction brings out the curious mix of the sensual and the poetic that marks both Bolaño's and Sordello's works--poetry as sex, poetry as pretension, seduction as citation, identity through deferral. Sordello figures in all of this as just another of those rogues who blusters his way into powerful positions and someone's secret desires. This dual vision of Sordello as both a high literary figure of elite culture and a figure of loss and disappointment highlights what has been his uncanny ability to be what we most need him to be, a conclusion that is more than justified by his own verse. A combination of hedonistic bragging, reshuffled love topoi, tributes to his predecessors and biting satirical wit, Sordello is just a hard nut to crack and remains a cipher in each of the domains in which his name has been preserved.

Perhaps his most blatant admission that pleasure was always his ultimate aim comes in the early *cobla*, '*Si com estau...*', found in one manuscript only (I 124):

Si com estau taing qu'esteia  
 Qui vol far faich ab valor,  
 Que totz lo monz mi guerreia  
 Per dompnas e per amor.  
 L'us me vol mal per enveja,  
 L'autre per la parenz lor;  
 Qui m'en cre faire paor,  
 Consel lo que lo descreia;  
 Qu'eu sui tals que, qui que.n plor,  
 Eu viu jauzenz sens temor.<sup>9</sup>

(Just as I am, so should anyone be who wishes to accomplish deeds of valor; for everyone is at war with me, over love and ladies. This one wishes me harm out of pure envy and that one over family pride. Whoever thinks he has succeeded in frightening me, I have a word of advice that should cut him down to size: I am such a man who lives his life--however much others deplore it--in and for pleasure and without fear).

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<sup>9</sup> Found in Wilhelm, Sordello, song 42, p. 144. Translation of this and all texts by Sordello are my own, but based on Wilhelm's published editions.

The same instincts can be intuited in another early but probably post-Italy canso, ‘*Aitant ses plus viu hom . . .*’:

Aitant ses plus viu hom quan viu jauzens  
 C’autre viure no.s deu vid’apellar;  
 Per qu’ieu m’esfors de viur’e de reinhar  
 Ab joy, per leys plus coratjozamens  
 Servir qu’ieu am, quar hom que viu marritz  
 Non pot de cor far bos faitz ni grazitz;  
 Doncx er merces si.m fai la plus grazida  
 Viure jauzens, pus als no.m ten a vida. (ll. 1-8)<sup>10</sup>

(A man lives only insofar as he lives with joy, / for any other existence can’t be termed life; / this is why I struggle to live and behave myself / with joy, in order to serve most from the heart / the one I love, for a person who dwells in sorrow / cannot perform good or pleasing deeds from the heart; / and so it will be a blessing if that gracious lady / makes me live joyously, since nothing else binds me to this life.)

Much as one might like to avoid drawing biographical conclusions from poetic texts, this cobla and *canso* certainly invite such potentially reductive readings. His own self-presentation as an adventurous lover, political seducer, home-wrecker and breaker of hearts strikes so close to home that is hard not to see it, at the very least, as part of a cultivated image of the free-wheeling poet and irresistible rogue that he projected in those early years. Yet though his reputation was certainly made in some aristocratic Italian circles by virtue of this boisterous self-presentation, the greater part of his career was actually spent outside of Lombardy and the Veneto, away from the glare of public dishonor. If he had never left Italy we would probably know him today only as a footnote to

<sup>10</sup> See ‘Sordello (437.2) at <[http://www.rialto.unina.it/Sordel/437.2\(Boni\).htm](http://www.rialto.unina.it/Sordel/437.2(Boni).htm)>. The Rialto website (here 6.iv.2005), curated by Stefano Asperti, gives full information on manuscripts, versification and other editions and reproduces the text from Boni’s 1954 critical edition, *Sordello, le poesie*, song 2. The song appears in eight manuscripts, including the Neapolitan manuscript M, about which Stefano Asperito has written so persuasively in *Carlo d’Angiò e il trovatori* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1995).

Dante, for it was in Provence that Sordello truly came into his own, made his fortune, and established himself as a chameleon, in just the way that was expected of any successful thirteenth-century troubadour. From adventurer to sage, Sordello was able to refashion himself along the lines required of poets dependent upon important patrons with very worldly interests and political ambitions to boot. Just as Raimbaut de Vaqueiras had established himself as the model of the poet/advisor, the indispensable master of rhetoric, military advisor, and best mate that Bonifaccio di Monferrato needed in his struggle to retain control of the Piemonte and assert his leadership of the fourth crusade; and Uc de Saint Circ had secured for himself a position in the Veneto as the ally, teacher and PR man for Alberico da Romano, Sordello chose his patrons wisely. His own trajectory led him from the great centers of the Veneto, Castile, Barcelona, Rodez and the Auvergne to Aix, Aups and Marseille, where he mingled with Raimon Berenger and then his royal successor, Charles d'Anjou.<sup>11</sup> The *Ensenhamen d'onor*, untitled in the single manuscript that contains it but recognizable for the internal reference to the text that he has composed, is a sort of treatise on courtliness, patronage and chivalric responsibility---a work that establishes Sordello's own qualifications as poet and counselor of wisdom, that could be seen as a presentation text to those from whom he was seeking support.<sup>12</sup> As such, it presents a very different picture of the troubadour than one is used to--one that might seem to clash with the hedonistic and morally indifferent figure we meet in the early songs and *razo*. In the commentary that follows, I will attempt to extricate from the sometimes stodgy rhetoric of *mezura* (moderation) and rectitude that the poet is desperately attempting to project, the poetic bite that characterizes his work in general and the essential continuity that unites this 'moral treatise' with his more playful, gritty and exuberant work in the *tensos* and *coblas*.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> It was during the period in Aix and Aups that his patron and friend Blacatz died, and it is for his justifiably famous, much copied *planh* on the death of Blacatz that Sordello is known today. See Boni, song 26 and online at: [www.rialto.unina.it/Sordel/437.24\(Boni\).htm](http://www.rialto.unina.it/Sordel/437.24(Boni).htm).

<sup>12</sup> Ms G is an Italian manuscript, probably composed in Northern Italy in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and now held in the Brera Library in Milan (Biblioteca Ambrosiana R 71 sup).

<sup>13</sup> Wilhelm, for instance, characterizes the *cansos* in his edition of the collected poems as clever set pieces in which Sordello simply shuffles and

The *Ensenhamen* has always been somewhat burdened with its reputation for moral rectitude. For this we can largely blame Dante, who for reasons of his own, decided to treat Sordello not only as a poet who fomented antagonism within a political realm (this is the category within which Sordello makes his appearance in the seventh canto of the *Purgatorio*) but also as the honorable patriot and man of the highest standards in both poetry and politics. Dante clearly understood the double-edged sword that Occitan poetry presented to the world and he alternately celebrated in the *Commedia* one side (support of the social order in the case of Folquet de Marseille and Sordello) while condemning the other (responsible for social disorder, as in Francesca da Rimini and Bertran de Born), however unconvincingly. An art of eloquence as well as a vehicle for circulating political vindictiveness, moral probity, and advice for the lovelorn, troubadour song was by the thirteenth century first and foremost an unbeatable tool for self-promotion and cajolery of the mighty. This poem of 1327 verses, written some time between the accession of Charles d'Anjou as Count of Provence in 1246 and the usurpation of the Sicilian crown by Manfred in 1258, i.e., the official start of Charles's move into the wider reaches of Empire, strikes us as the work of a man in his prime, still hopeful of further advancement but old enough to temper his rasher tendencies. In many ways just a collection of popular wisdom, aphorisms, proverbs and complaints about the changing mores of his age, the *Ensenhamen* is nonetheless very much a piece of popular propaganda, addressed to a powerful personage and through him the image that is reflected in the people over whom he rules. In typical troubadour fashion, however, this powerful personage is addressed in the feminine persona of N'Agradiva, thus conflating, as was the wont of these poets, love and politics, erotics and morals, male and female, poetry and preaching.

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reorganizes the conventional themes and imagery of his predecessors. The *coblas* and *tensos*, on the other hand, he acknowledges as spirited, original, and biting. Stefano Asperti asserts that Sordello had already acquired a reputation as a sage among poets by 1254, probably largely on the basis of the *Ensenhamen*. See Stefano Asperti, 'Sordello tra Raimondo Berengario V e Carlo I d'Angiò', *Sordello da Goito: atti del convegno internazionale di studi (Goito-Mantova, 13-15 novembre 1997)*, *Cultura neolatina* 60.1-2 (2000), pp. 141-159.

The advice genre had already had a lustrous history by the time that Sordello put his pen to it. Arnaut de Mareuil (*Razos es e mesura*), Raimon Vidal de Besalú (*Abril issia*), Garin lo Brun (*El termini d'estiu*), Arnaut Guillem de Marsan (*Qui comte vol aprendre*), et N'Amanieu de Sescas (*L'essenhamen de la donzela*) had already written their versions of a popular guide to chivalric, poetic and patronage practice, but Sordello takes it a step further.<sup>14</sup> In addition to critiquing the loss of chivalric values and women's honour in contemporary courts, he forgoes an interlocutor or pupil and addresses his complaint to all who depend on the generosity of the chivalric system, including the ever more important bourgeoisie, his fellow troubadours and the lesser nobility with whom he identified. He announces a new world order based firmly on a dying one and celebrates the reestablishment of a set of mores that are independent of both the Church and the feudal order.

Resolutely original in its refusal to cite its sources, be they biblical, classical or theological, Sordello relies almost exclusively on troubadour wisdom from the previous century, a store of accumulated knowledge that served as well as a storehouse of lore on traditional chivalric practices. Patrons, if one were to follow Sordello's reading, should be nothing if not conservative. They should toe the line and respect their predecessors. Poets, on the other hand, should act as a modernizing force in society. They should mould themselves to the environment in which they find themselves, providing a commentary on current events at the same time that they shape them through their rhetoric and guidance. And on what basis exactly do these master troubadours establish their authority, one might ask? On their experience? On their learning? Or simply on their adaptability? As in Alain Badiou's quirky notion of ethics, the troubadour should always be seeking a "way of being" that depends simply on what amounts to a momentary decision: not a system of ethics as a universal set of rules governing any contingency and determined by revelation and practice, but an ethics that emerges from a specific experience, as

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<sup>14</sup> Editions of these texts can be found in "L'enseignement de Garin lo Brun", ed. K. Appel, *Revue des langues romanes* 33 (1889), pp. 404-432; "L'ensenhamen d'Arnaut de Mareuil", ed. M. Eusebi, *Romania* 90 (1969), pp. 14-30; and for the texts by Arnaut Guilhem de Marsan and N'Amanieu de Sescas, see: Giuseppe E. Sansone, *Testi didattico-cortesi di Provenza* (Bari: Adriatica Editrice, 1977).

in an ethics of politics, of love, or science, or of art.<sup>15</sup> In Sordello's terms, these codes would translate into an ethics of war, an ethics of the court, and another ethics of personal advancement. There does not seem to be at work a quest to find one particular ethical system that exceeds the bounds of the experience confronted. Rather, Sordello somehow manages never to mention the name of Charles d'Anjou in the *Ensenhamen*, much as the traditional *canço* strenuously avoids any mention of the lady to whom it is addressed or refers; but the spirit of both absent presences nonetheless color, even haunt, the proceedings. In this world of rapidly changing values, reversals of power between empire and papacy, linguistic fluidity and raging ambition, Sordello contents himself with the practical, the ethics of simply being in such a world: how to be a lover, sage or hypocrite when that is exactly what is needed. Give, he says, even when you have nothing so that you will be seen as one who gives; be honest and show good taste if only to encourage these virtues in those who depend upon you and on whose loyalty you depend, even when you know yourself to be dishonest, cunning and venal. Embrace, in essence, the hypocrite within:

Om non es be savis per ver  
si soven no sap far parer  
que l'ennueia zo que li plai,  
e.l plaza zo que li desplai;  
e qui aquest sen be rete  
totz tems es savis per ma fe' (777-782)<sup>16</sup>

(A man is not truly wise / if he doesn't often make it  
appear / that he dislikes what he likes / and likes what he  
dislikes. / And anyone who retains this dictum well / is  
truly the wise man, upon my faith!)

Neither a theologian nor a legal scholar, as he admits in this next passage, he valorizes thinking on one's feet, making ethical decisions on the basis of the moment and the circumstances:

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<sup>15</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Understanding of Evil (Wo es war)*, trans. P. Hallward (London: Verso, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> The text cited is from Wilhelm's edition and all translations are my own, based for the most part on those provided by Wilhelm.

e quar no sai divinitat,  
leis ni decretz, ni m'es mostrat,  
ni m'en val forsa d'escriptura,  
anz o faz tot en aventura,  
ab un pauc de sen natural (27-31)

(and since I don't know much about theology, / laws and decrees, and it has never been explained to me properly, / nor is scripture of much use to me / I deal with things on a come-as-you-will basis / using the little bit of natural sense I was born with.)

And yet, despite this lack of formal credentials, he claims to be very much deserving of attention:

E, sitot mos senz non es granz,  
vuell far saber entre.ls prezanç  
zo que er profieh e onors  
a totz cels, a qui plaz valors,  
qu'aprendre et retenir volran  
zo qu'auzir en mos ditz poiran;  
sitot las razos son diversas,  
tan qu'eu sai que seran aversas  
per aprendre et per retenir,  
quar no si podon be seguir (13-22).

(But though my learning isn't impressive / I want to make it known amongst the worthy out there / something that will bring profit and honor / to all those who appreciate their reputation / and who are able to understand what I am saying: I know that the arguments may be too convoluted to learn and commit to memory and that they are also not, for that very reason, easy to follow...)

It is probably quite obvious by now from what I have been saying that this is a text that never speaks monologically and never delivers a univocal message. One key example of this deliberate double-speak is his advice to the reader that we must learn to understand the world without ever allowing ourselves to be understood by it:

Qui vol regnar ab sen verai,  
 obs l'es de conosser si poign  
 totz jornz lo segle et s'en don soign,  
 e no.s lais conosser a lui (736-739)

(He who wishes to rule (or govern himself) with true wisdom must strive continuously to know the world as it is, and put his mind to that task, while never allowing the world to know him).

This insistence on reading double and seeing the signifier quite apart from the signified extends especially to his portrait of the very men, the very rich men, to whom he would seem to be appealing:

Be.m meravill, si Deus be.m do,  
 quom on pot aver pauc e pro  
 ensems; que ben i a, zo.s dic,  
 d'aitals: *sabez qual so?* Li ric  
 de terras e d'aver manen,  
 paubre de cor, e vueg de sen,  
 que non amon pretz ni lauzor,  
 ni temon nulla desonor,  
 ni an en lur faitz nul esgart  
 de be far, ni engien, ni art . . . (909-918)

(I truly wonder, and may God help me with this one, / how a single man can have a lot and a little at the same time, / for there are such men, or so they say / who have just this problem: and do you know who they are? Rich men / who have land and money / but are poor at heart and have no sense, / who neither hold praise nor reputation in repute nor fear the effects of dishonor / and who in their actions show no regard for good deeds, or crafty intelligence or art . . .)

He reserves his harshest disdain for those who behave other than their social rank would dictate and upset the courtly rules upon which the very fabric of social order itself depends:

Car Dieus los a desemparatz,  
tan los sap vils e descoratz.  
Aquel son li caitiu dolen,  
paubre et ric ensems, que viven  
son mort : sabez per que? Quar fan  
vida tal, que ja non auran  
grat de Deu, ni del segle onor,  
ni a lor cor nulla legor.  
Aquelz pot om per desastrucs  
tener part totz los malastrucs (919-928)

(Thus God has deserted them, / for he found them vile  
and heartless. / These are truly the most pitiful of  
beggars / poor and rich alike, who live / in death; and  
do you want to know why? Because the life they live  
means that they will never have / the grace of God nor  
the honors of the world / nor any joy at all in their  
hearts. / These are the men whom one could call the  
most unlucky and rejected / amongst all the damned.)

Such men, too thick to feel shame at their own loss of prestige,  
deserve all the contempt they get from the three orders who are  
above critique, in Sordello's version of reality, even by patrons:

De tres genz no deu dire mal  
nulz oms, que am fin pretz cabal :  
de dopnas, ni de cavaliers  
paubres, que.l mals es trop sobriers,  
ni de juglars ; quar, ses conten,  
cel fai trop mortal faillimen  
qui bassa zo que.s deu levar (563-569)

(No man who values the very finest values and  
reputation / should speak ill of three types of people: /  
ladies, poor knights / for the wrongdoing in this case is  
simply overwhelming / and jonglar-poets; for, with any  
doubt / such a man would be committing a mortal failing  
/ who puts down further those who should by all rights  
be raised up.)

Not a rich man himself, or at least not by this point in his life,

Sordello defends the ladies who offer their names in return for praise, poor knights like himself who lack the means to establish themselves along traditional lines, and the poor performers (*jongleurs*) who in exchange for their services to undeserving lords and ladies find themselves in the undignified role of playing victim and scapegoat to the stupid. The terms of the contracts that are written up (at least metaphorically) between those who have and those who know are the *raison d'être* of this *ensenhamen*; and the text itself, even as it dispenses its advice and critique, performs these functions even as it describes them—a sort of spontaneous demonstration of the speech act at work. Sordello is too clever simply to dispense his wisdom, however; this *ensenhamen* is also an acknowledgement of the delicate symbiotic system within which troubadours flourish: lord, lady, text and poet; and an admission that that balance is forever in danger of imminent collapse.

Death is almost absent from the *Ensenhamen*, as though to evoke its presence at all would be to admit the ever-enveloping dread that it casts over the proceedings. Yet it enters into the repertoire of imagery when he begins discussing those perfidious figures whose actions are responsible for pushing courtly culture ever closer to its demise. These figures are those who live lives that, in his estimation, are simply not worth living:

Cent per un deu om plus doptar  
la mort d'onor, qui la te car,  
que s'om del tot mor e desvai ;  
que la mort[z] del cors ja si fai  
breumen, e ja pues non aura  
dolor cel que de cors morra ;  
mas qui mor de l'onor seglar  
jamais ab gauh non pot estar  
e cel vio plus marridamen  
qu'a viscut plus onradamen (1251-1260)

(A hundred times more should a man / who holds honor  
dear fear its death / than fear death itself or one's  
disappearance from the world; / for the death of the  
body can happen so quickly / and never thereafter will  
the dead man feel pain; / but the one who experiences  
the social death of honor in the world / will never again  
feel joy / and the one who suffers the most from this lack

/ is the one who once lived bedecked with the most honor.)

Or, one might put it another way: signs of the anxiety that pursues the poet throughout his diatribe begin to proliferate in the second half of the poem. Rhetorical questions follow one upon another, sometimes erupting in the middle of statements, like conversations diverted:

‘Quar per aizo a valors nom / valors per valer: *sabez com?*  
(657-658)

or:

‘pos que d’aver no.ill costaria / ni de cors re: e *sabetz qual?* (1034-1035)

or:

‘. . . que ben i a, zo.s dic, d’aitals: *sabez qual so?* (911-912).

Other rhetorical tours de force become more prominent as well, putting on show the poet’s rhythmic and metrical skills as well as his clever punning on *onor* and *onrar*--honor but also money, honoring but also rewarding:

Be.m miravill d’ome provat  
D’avolesa e de malvestat,  
Con ausa esser tan ricautz,  
Ni entre.ls conossenz si bautz,  
ni tan fols, que s’ausa cujar,  
*que nulz om bos lo deia onrar;*  
*qu’aissi com om s’onra, onran*  
*l’onrat valen, vai desonran*  
*s’onnor qui onra.l desonrat*  
*malvaz, d’onor desemparat* (1047-1052).

(I truly wonder how a man / who is so addicted to evil and depravity / can dare to be so haughty / or so deceitful even with those who know him, / nor so mad that he dares to think / that any man should owe him

respect; / for just as a man respects himself / by showing  
 respect to an honorable man, / so a man who shows  
 respect for the evil man who has been abandoned by  
 honor / is also showing himself no respect.)

quar s'uns oms autre desmesura  
 per ergoill, non passa dreitura  
 li desmesuratz, si.s n'ergoilla  
 ni fai tan que l'autres s'en doilla;  
 mas ades lo comenzamenz  
 d'ergoill es mortals faillimenz (1063-1068)

(for if a man treats another with contempt / out of pride,  
 the wronged party is completely within his rights / if he  
 in turn shows arrogance / or takes action to ensure that  
 the first party suffers; / even though the growth of pride  
 in a person / is still a mortal failing.)

The anaphors in particular are more abrasive (as in his use of *lialtat* on lines 409-418) and his tautologies (*mesura/desmesura* on lines 381-5) and use of derived rhyme, of which Boni counted over forty examples.<sup>17</sup> The instances in which these rhetorical fireworks are found are also, not surprisingly, among the most critical passages of the poem, as if the excitement and anger of the poet has ignited as well his rhetorical expertise. Those who are insufficiently generous with their funds are 'servants of their funds' or 'serfs to their money' (518); these are half-men who live the half-life that they deserve:

. . . quar manz n'i a  
 que sabon far lor pro, ni ja  
 non si sabran del dan gardar :  
 cels pot om demiegz apellar' (729-732).

(for there are many amongst us / who know how to act  
 in their own interest / even if they do not know how to  
 protect themselves from harm; and these are the men we  
 can call half-men.)

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<sup>17</sup> Boni, *Sordello*, CLXXV.

This qualification of ‘half’ then returns as a leitmotif and always in a pejorative sense:

E de tot cavalier volpill  
 ni cubetos mi meravill  
 com bona dopna ausa pregar,  
 ni com dopna lui escoltar;  
 qu’el non es mas mieg[z]-cavaliers;  
 qu’esser non pot negus entiers  
 en amor, si no es arditz  
 e larcs, qu’estiers non es compliz ;  
 et, si dopna consen aman  
 demieg, torna d’aquel semblan  
 demiega, al laus dels conossenz (1069-1079)

(And I am most amazed that a cowardly / and selfish knight / can dare to direct his pleas at a fine lady/ or that the lady will deign to listen to him; / for he is nothing more than a half-knight; / for no man can be wholly / in love, if he is not passionate / and generous for otherwise he is just not complete; / and if a lady consents to love a half-man lover / she becomes by virtue of that choice / a half-lady, in the esteem of her circle; for a lady cannot truly have / any more praise or honor / than her lover has worth.)

Leonine and derived rhyme becomes ever more evident (as in the ‘onrar’ passage just cited) and frequent enjambment betrays the frustration and pent-up emotion of a man too long constrained by social obligation. If one can never really accommodate one’s behavior and social custom; if noble titles rarely, if ever, suit the mundanity of their holders; these sorts of social disjunction find expression in the ludic doubling of sound and sensation that mark this second part of the poem. It is up to the poet both to evoke this disparity between sign and signified and to find a remedy through language to supplement the inevitable break between sound and thing, moral order and the social structure, the real and the ideal. That solution is, of course, art. As much as the enjambment calls us back to the substantive break between appearance and reality that recalls subjectivity itself, it also soothes the ear and the eye through meter and song and maintains the illusion that the break has been

mended. For this reason, Giorgio Agamben's claim that enjambement is the true sign that distinguishes poetry from prose, and his consequent defense of rhetoric, is not that far off from what Sordello himself might have said:

Everything is complicated by the fact that in the poem there are not, strictly speaking, two series or lines in parallel flight. Rather, there is but one line that is simultaneously traversed by the semantic current and the semiotic current. And between the flowing of these two currents lies the sharp interval obstinately maintained by poetic *mechane*. (Sound and sense are not two substances but two intensities, two *tonoi* of the same linguistic substance.) And the poem is like the *katechon* in Paul's Second Epistle to the Thessalonians (2:7-7): something that slows and delays the advent of the Messiah, that is, of him who, fulfilling the time of poetry and uniting its two eons, would destroy the poetry machine by hurling it into silence. But what could be the aim of this theological conspiracy about language? Why so much ostentation to maintain, at any cost, a difference that succeeds in guaranteeing the space of the poem only on condition of depriving it of the possibility of a lasting accord between sound and sense?<sup>18</sup>

This is the task that Sordello set himself: to reconnect outside the field of theology the two strands of the *ensenhamen* and of poetry in general – sound and meaning, the real world and the ideal. Incapable of acting as a guarantor for that meaning, as God might do, and replacing cacophony with silence, Sordello instead leaves us with a poem that is bipolar, bi-temporal and bi-signifying. Without in any way diminishing its worth, this dual function is at the heart of the *Ensenhamen's* power: as it castigates the rich hypocrite and his lackeys, it advocates what amounts to another form of hypocrisy, only much more clever and self-aware. What begins as a treatise on honor ends as a *salutz d'amor*, after all, a love letter to an unnamed and perhaps unnamable lady – a lady that

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<sup>18</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 114.

isn't one.<sup>19</sup> An orgy of twenty superlatives marks the entrance of this absent lady to the proceedings in the last twenty lines of the text as all moral intentions are overturned by rhetorical extravagance. While claiming its due as a repository of privileged knowledge, this *ensenhamen* wags its curry-favoring tail and waves the flag of partisan politics. Its success is a direct result of its failure – its frank admission that politics and philosophy, any more than poetry and reality, can never be compatible. Not only does Sordello admit to that inadmissible truth, at least in the sinuous logic of troubadour rhetoric, he points out as well the gap between these two types of knowledge, these two types of hypocrisy – two brands of language, two types of readership, and two worlds held apart by entitlement and rank. Of course, the *Ensenhamen* fails – how could it not? – but in spite of its reputation as one of the most obscure and unintelligible (or uninterpretable) of troubadour texts, it would be foolish to claim that this particular letter never arrived at its destination. It stands as a brilliant illustration of how politics hides inevitably behind rhetoric and in doing so, succeeds as few medieval texts did in allowing a glimpse of the historic moment from which it emerged and to which it also, perhaps, gave rise.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> “la plus bella, la plus prezan / la mellor, la plus avinen, / la plus certa, la [plus] plazen, / la plus nobla, la plus umill, / et en totz fatz la plus gentill, / la plus comda, la plus cortesa, et de totz bes la melz apresada, / la plus covinen, la plus genta, / e qui als pros mais atalenta, / la plus neta, la plus azauta, et de totz bos aibs la plus auta, / la melz amada, e que menz ama, e que mais a de bona fama” (ll. 1308-1320).

<sup>20</sup> This essay is based on an oral presentation that was given at a special conference in honor of the work of Linda Paterson and convened at King's College London in June 2008 entitled *La Diaspora occitane au moyen âge : la culture occitane en Occitanie et ailleurs*.

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